The New York Times MAGAZINE 14
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 18 OCTOBER 87

On Language
BY WILLIAM SAFIRE

# Piece of Work

ILLEGIB

IN "VEIL," HIS BOOK about William J. Casey's C.I.A., Bob Woodward climbs inside the head of Bobby Ray Inman, who had been our deputy chief spook and was apparently a key source for the newsman. "After a year," writes Woodward, "Inman had come to regard Casey as a 'piece of work,' a term that Casey often applied to the oddballs in their midst."

Although I never sought to penetrate the dying Bill Casey's heavily guarded hospital room, I can attest to my old pal's frequent use of the term. "He's a *piece of work*," the Director of Central Intelligence would murmur, referring to a tempestuous legal client or kooky foreign leader, shaking his head in a mixture of wonderment and either disapproval or grudging admiration.

The phrase, as Casey used it, had a built-in ambiguity, which has not always been the case. The first citation in the Oxford English Dictionary's Supplement is under *nasty*: "a nasty piece (or bit) of work (or goods)." The mystery writer Agatha Christie preferred "nasty bit of goods," but the novelist Monckton Hoffe in 1928 described a villain as "really a rather nasty piece of work."

Even without the qualifying *nasty*, the British term *piece of work* long had a pejorative connotation. In a 1965 collection of short stories, Abioseh Nicol had a character think "what an obstinate and unpleasant piece of work the fellow was." This negative sense followed the phrase to the United States: in an interchange between famous novelists in 1978, after Gore Vidal dismissed Norman Mailer with "He reads nothing at all — he's never read me," Mr. Mailer shot back, "He's really such a corrupt and unpleasant piece of work when you get to know him."

Was it always thus? The phrase first appeared in a circa 1540 interlude written by the dramatist John Heywood: "Here is an eye-tooth of the Great Turk:/ Whose eyes be once set on this piece of work,/ May happily lese part of his eyesight." In that context, the phrase seems to convey admiration, but a half-century later, a new meaning of "hard task, difficult business" was given the phrase in the author and translator Richard Carew's "It were an infinit peece of worke." This meaning of "strained effort" gained a figurative extension of "ado, commotion" in Charles Dickens's novel "Martin Chuzzlewit": "What are you making all this piece of work for?"

During this development, a parallel phrase appeared in slang: *piece of trade*, "prostitute," derived from *piece of tail*, a derogation of a supposedly promiscuous woman. This has been clipped to the sexist slur *piece*, and is not to be confused in its meaning with *piece of work* in either the admiring or put-down sense.

Along the way, between the early coinage of *piece of work* to denote an intricate job and its later adoption (apparently throughout our intelligence agencies) as applicable to assets or targets who are "oddball, eccentric, weird," the phrase was immortalized by William Shakespeare's Hamlet:

"What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties ... how like an angel in apprehension! how like a god!"

He was not suggesting man is some kind of flake. Consider Prince Hamlet himself: a man tortured by doubt, driven by dreams, trusting

Continued

nobody, burdened by his bloody secrets, half-crazily pretending to be demented. There was a piece of work.

## Off the Flaw

"I REGRET MORE DEEPly than I can express," stated Presidential candidate Alexander M. Haig Jr., "that the current proposed arms-control agreement is seriously flawed."

I give Al credit for that: he avoided the most crashing cliché of treatymanship, that ringing triumph of alliteration, *fatally flawed*. (He went on to say, "I cannot support the proposed agreement, however much that may be the politically popular thing to do." Where did I hear that before?)

*Fatally flawed* was Ronald Reagan's characterization of the SALT II treaty negotiated by the Carter Administration, because he said it would not bring about reductions in large Soviet land-based missiles. The phrase worked well for him; in 1987, he told an interviewer that the plan put forward by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias Sanchez in Guatemala was *fatally flawed*. The New York Times, in rebuttal, editorialized: "The Guatemala plan, whatever its weaknesses, is not fatally flawed." The editorialist knew that, in the game of treaty flaws, to be *seriously flawed* is to mean "Look, this isn't so hot, but with a few big fixes, I could live with it," but to be *fatally flawed* is to mean "This is one I want to run against."

Mopping the flaws with fatality has resulted in a waxy buildup of bromide. "He said my résumé was fatally flawed," wrote a job-hunter in Dun's Review in 1975, "because it failed to tell a prospective employer what I could do for him." In 1983, United States Ambassador to UNESCO Jean Gerard said that the organization was "so skewed, so far off course, so fatally flawed" that the United States had to get out.

Indiana Senator Richard G. Lugar, observing a fraudulent election in the Philippines in 1986, refused to accept its legitimacy because the balloting was flawed in the way we have all come to know and love. Nor is the phrase limited to political righties: a spokesman for the Union of Concerned Scientists called Mr. Reagan's Star Wars proposal too costly to put up and too inexpensive to shoot down, therefore "fatally flawed."

First use? Merriam-Webster has a 1916 citation from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's On the Art of Writing, in which the famed stylist criticizes a work for "the one fatal flaw that it imports emotion into a theme which does not properly admit of emotion." The lexicographer Fred Mish thinks the phrase goes back much further (not farther): "Normally, the noun phrase would be constructed first — *fatally flawed* would come out of *fatal flaw* — and my guess is that *fatal flaw* is much older than 1916." Lexicographic Irregulars who want to top the O.E.D. and Merriam-Webster have their work cut out for them, a cliché dating to I don't know when.

It could be that *fatal flaw* is rooted in *tragic flaw*. According to Stan Malless and Jeff McQuain's A Handlist to English, that tragic flaw, called in Greek *hamartia*, is "a fatal weakness in a tragic hero's character. In tragedy, *hamartia* causes the tragic hero's downfall or death. ... Having too much ambition is one of the most common examples."

Which brings us back to Presidents and candidates for President, who search for fatal or at least serious flaws and eschew *hubris*, the excess of confidence that is another of the banana peels set in the paths of heroes.

The first candidate to criticize a treaty, any treaty, without the use of the dread term, gets a laurel wreath from this department. Yes, when a noun phrase ("That treaty has a fatal flaw") develops into an adjective modifying a noun ("That is one fatally flawed dish of oatmeal"), it becomes known to grammarians as a participial phrase. Knowing that leads to hubris. ■

25.